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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001200

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES POLITICS AND THE WAY FORWARD
WITH HOUSE SPEAKER AND THAKSIN ASSOCIATES

REF: A. BANGKOK 1157 (WAY OUT OF IMPASSE)

[1](#)B. 08 BANGKOK 3167 (THAKSIN CONVICTED)

[1](#)C. 08 BANGKOK 3080 (QUEEN SHOWS SUPPORT FOR PAD)

BANGKOK 00001200 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) A leading associate of former Prime Minister Thaksin told the Ambassador in mid-May that pro-Thaksin supporters had poorly served their interests by engaging in violent riots in mid-April; a second associate reiterated his earlier assertion that the redshirt movement was now "way beyond Thaksin." The Ambassador's interlocutors estimated that stark political divisions in Thailand would persist for a lengthy period. Thaksin was likely most concerned with his personal interests, rather than political issues. Although the monarchy and its allies remained preeminent, they asserted, its prestige had declined as it no longer appeared above politics, and it faced an uncertain future with few competent advisers. Separately, Ambassador also met with House Speaker Chai Chidchob (not currently aligned with Thaksin), who explained that he was deferring to the chairmen of the recently-established committees on reconciliation and on fact-finding regarding recent riots to proceed as they saw fit.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: With public bickering over the contents of possible reconciliation and reform measures, and a near fistfight in the well of Parliament late May 15 between ruling Democrat Party and opposition Puea Thai MPs, Thailand's deep political divide remains on display. Limited constitutional amendments and new elections appear to be a plausible relief valve which may occur in the next year. However, the underlying divisions in Thai society and the body politic will continue until King Bhumibol passes and Thailand goes through a succession crisis which will likely redefine the role of the monarchy, the country's leading but tattered institution.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment, continued: U.S. interlocutors can and should urge Thai political actors of all stripes to pursue peaceful, democratic, constitutional means in the political process and positioning for influence in the transition phase. We also need to demonstrate that we are not taking sides in this

debate and to continue to meet with the entire range of the (peaceful) political spectrum. However, this debate, involving the future role of the monarchy and redefining what it means to be Thai, will remain the ultimate internal Thai discourse, with Thais largely deaf or indifferent to outside voices. End Summary and Comment.

AMBASSADOR'S INTERLOCUTORS

14. (C) The Ambassador met separately on May 13 and 14 with Surapong Suebwonglee and Pansak Vinyaratn, respectively. Both men were key advisors to Thaksin during his time as Prime Minister. After the 2006 coup d'etat, Pansak, whom many royalists consider to be a republican, kept a low public profile, but he continues to advise Thaksin and write set speeches for him, particularly on economic and international themes. Surapong became Secretary General of the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) and served as Deputy Prime Minister under PM Samak Sundaravej. Surapong told the Ambassador he had not spoken directly with Thaksin since December 2008; Pansak acknowledged an ongoing association with Thaksin's international efforts connected to Nicaragua and refurbishing his image as an international statesman. The Ambassador also called on Speaker of the House Chai Chidchob on May 14. Chai won election to the House in 2007 as a PPP member, but after PPP's dissolution in December 2008, he was part of a faction which defected to the Democrat Party's coalition and joined the Phumjai Thai party, largely seen as under control of his influential son Newin Chidchob. Chai's comments on U.S.-Thai legislative relations and his concerns about growing Chinese influence are reported septel.

MID-APRIL RED RIOTS: THAKSIN'S ROLE, U.S. REACTION

BANGKOK 00001200 002.2 OF 003

15. (C) The Ambassador opened his discussion with Surapong by explaining his support for the right of people to express their political views, but he emphasized that demonstrations should be peaceful, and the violent anti-government protests in mid-April were unacceptable. Surapong agreed, stating that the pro-Thaksin "redshirts" would have benefited from showing Thais that they comported themselves better than the PAD. The Ambassador remarked that Thaksin surely exacerbated concerns on the royalist side with his call for revolution which, in the context of April demonstrations, appeared to entail violence. Surapong nodded in agreement, making no indication that he believed Thaksin's subsequent protest that he (Thaksin) called only for a non-violent revolution.

16. (C) Pansak, whom some have alleged played a role, along with redshirt leader Jakkrapob Penkair, in egging Thaksin into a more aggressive approach to the Songkran protests, claimed that the red movement was now "way beyond Thaksin." Ambassador emphasized that the U.S. supported the right of all, including redshirts, to conduct peaceful protests expressing political views, but that violent riots were another matter. Pansak initially tried to argue that the redshirts in Pattaya had been provoked by Newin-associated "blue shirts," and that the protest leaders had no way of controlling such large crowds. However, he fully acknowledged our point that for weeks before the riots, red-associated community radio had incited violence through repeated calls for supporters to "fight the government in the streets" and characterizations of Abhisit as leading a "terrorist government" and "treasonous cabal."

17. (C) Pansak took issue with the Acting State Department Spokesman's April 13 condemnation of redshirt violence, asking whether the USG defined violence narrowly as physical contact, separate from seizures of airports or security personnel's use of armed force against demonstrators. Ambassador replied that we had criticized the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) for its illegal takeover of

Government House and airport seizure and had called upon the PAD to leave the airport peacefully in a State Department-issued statement, later denounced on the PAD stage. Pansak grunted agreement, but suggested that the USG would be well served by clarifying its position publicly, as being against use of violence by all sides, and for the principles of democracy, for the sake of Thailand's stability and prosperity. Such a balanced statement would "go far in reaching out to Isaan (northeast Thailand) and the younger generation of red activists who may well be running this country in five-ten years." Ambassador took note of Pansak's suggestion.

RECONCILIATION

18. (C) House Speaker Chai Chidchob stated that the committees he had established (ref A) -- on political reconciliation and fact-finding with regard to mid-April "redshirt" riots -- were important to enabling reconciliation between the two sides, as no one accepted any other mechanism aside from those associated with the parliament. He stressed that the committees included representatives from the government, the opposition, as well as outsiders. Chai said the committee and subcommittee chairmen had the right to proceed as they saw fit, and he would not interfere with their efforts; rather, he would simply await their reports.

9.(C) Ambassador said that he and U.S. policymakers in Washington were watching developments closely and, as friends of Thailand, wanted political disputes resolved through political mechanisms, not through violence. Chai welcomed the Ambassador's interest and expressed confidence that both sides would eventually calm down and adopt a constructive approach, with greater understanding in the short-term and a stronger democratic system in the longer term. Chai also assured the Ambassador he saw no reason for concern about security in advance of Secretary Clinton's July visit.

10. (C) For his part, Surapong suggested that the current

BANGKOK 00001200 003.2 OF 003

state of affairs in Thailand resulted from a decades-long growth of tension between Thailand's "haves" and "have-nots." A perception that the rule of law was weak -- as illustrated by a lack of effective enforcement against the PAD -- exacerbated economic disparities. Surapong said the stresses that were now in public view were but the "tip of the iceberg," and that it would take years for Thailand to emerge from this period of discord.

11. (C) Pansak characterized Abhisit's current efforts at reconciliation and political reform as a way of legitimizing his administration; the best way forward for the country, he maintained, would be renewed general elections, whether immediately or after constitutional amendments. The key issue for Pansak was maintenance of the rule of law and transparency in equal treatment of political forces.

THAKSIN

12. (C) Surapong lamented that Thaksin received poor strategic advice from those who escort him while he remains overseas. Surapong said Thaksin might not be especially intent on returning to political life; Thaksin's family would not support that, although some self-interested politicians would seek to draw Thaksin back into the political arena. Thaksin's main motivation, Surapong believed, likely was to regain the major part of his fortune, especially the wealth he had accumulated prior to becoming Prime Minister. Thaksin also wanted "fair treatment" regarding his October 2008 conviction for violating Thailand's anti-corruption act (ref B). Surapong said that, since Thaksin's ex-wife Potjaman was acquitted of wrongdoing in connection with her purchase of land from a quasi-government body, it seemed unfair to

imprison Thaksin, who had simply provided pro forma endorsement of Potjaman's purchase.

THE MONARCHY, NOW AND FUTURE

¶13. (C) Surapong remarked that there was a relatively small degree of anti-monarchy sentiment in Thailand, but this had grown, thanks partly to unspecified rumors and partly to the actions of members of the royal family, such as the Queen's support of PAD in 2008 (see ref C). Consequently, the monarchy had lost some prestige; it was important for the royal family not to take any side in a political conflict.

¶14. (C) Pansak was considerably more direct about the failures of the institution. "We (Thaksin and company) tried so hard to help the royal family survive the 21st century" was his unbidden opening comment. Adding a reference to social turmoil under the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Cambodia in the 1970s: "we weren't interested in any Pol Pot ends to a post modern democracy." Pansak disparaged the advisers to the King and Queen who, in his mind, lacked the spine to propose a slimmed down monarchy along the lines of northern Europe or Spain, which was the model which could work for Thailand in the future. He also questioned the competency of the management of the Crown Property Bureau's (CPB) assets.

JOHN